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The Implications of Ethnonationalism on Democracy: Lessons from

India and Israel

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Abstract

As discontent climbs in nations that are becoming increasingly agitated by the inequities of globalization, many individuals have attempted to capitalize on this mounting dissatisfaction in order to further their respective political projects. Among these projects is a resurfacing of populism, which has birthed a return to ethnonationalist sentiments within India and Israel in particular. The diverse histories of these nations are gradually being replaced by fervent desires to homogenize their populations in order to consolidate new national identities. This paper will closely consider the cases of India and Israel as states that have experienced a growth in ethnonationalist sentiment in recent years and are now facing conflicts with their ethnic minorities. By examining these cases through a review of current literature, the paper will explore these nations' compatibility with democracy, which both nations purport to be. Through this examination, this paper attempts to traverse the effects of ethnic diversity on the integrity of democratic systems, and the methods by which ethnic majorities suppress the voices of ethnic minorities, in order to ultimately help illuminate the potential prognosis for the survival of democracy in such conditions.

Keywords: Ethnonationalism, Populism, Democracy, Hindutva, Zionism

Introduction

In recent years, the advent of new forms of technology that have facilitated an increase in globalization has permanently altered the way the world views and responds to concerns among its populations and how it mobilizes in order to criticize or alter forms of government. A resurgence of the ideation of populism—the notion of empowering the voices of “the people” over “the elite,” and increasing the involvement of the former in political decision-making¹—has capitalized upon mounting concerns regarding globalization in order to develop disestablishmentarianism from the ground up.

In several nations, populism appeals to an increasingly agitated population that has gradually begun to lose trust in the ability of the state to recover from economic distresses, making such nations ripe for the entrance of a new ideation to enact change. Examples of this populist transformation include the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Hungary’s Viktor Orban, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, India’s Narendra Modi, and Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu.

The great irony of the ideation of “the people’s” populism is that such movements often define “the people” along sectarian divisions and are often spearheaded by a single, charismatic leader who works to revolutionize the established order to consolidate his or her power. Additionally, populist movements tend to bind with other ideologies to appeal to their broad bases, such as nationalism or liberalism.

One such bind—between populism and ethnonationalism—decidedly represents the aforementioned movements of India and Israel. Ethnonationalism is a form of nationalism that

¹ Abts, Koen, and Stefan Rummens. “Populism versus Democracy.” *Political Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2007, pp. 405–424., doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00657.x. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00657.x>

strives to define the nation in terms of ethnicity.² Such an ideology presents itself as inherently exclusionary, volatile for minority rights, and often times at odds with democratic checks and balances.³

This introduces the grand conflict between populism and ethnonationalism, and democracy, and the critical inquiry of their compatibility—are ethnonationalism and democracy mutually exclusive?

If yes, then nations that formerly purported to be democracies, yet experienced markedly populist transformations that determined their ethnonationalist trajectories, perhaps need to reconsider their democratic status.

Two interpretations of democracy can be considered here. First, democracy can be imagined as the direct rule of the people in its purest form. Second, a more constitutional explanation can conceptualize democracy as the importance of representation.⁴ If the latter is to be adopted, since it tends to be the empirically implemented version, it becomes quite clear why ethnonationalism is less compatible with democracy. Failing to properly toe the line between the conservation of majority and minority rights, ethnonationalism inherently subjugates the minorities, thereby dismantling the tenant of representation that democracy so precariously sits upon.

² “*Research Associates*, Political Research Including a Discussion of Possible Connections Between Militant Islamic Fundamentalists and the U.S. Extreme Right.” *PublicEye.org - The Website of Political Associates*, www.publiceye.org/fascist/third_position.html.

³ Champion, Marc. “The Rise of Populism.” *Bloomberg.com*, Bloomberg, 2019, www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/populism.

⁴ Abts, 405–424.

As Robert L. Hardgrave eloquently puts it, “Liberal democracy stands or falls according to its ability to elicit a dual commitment to both majority rule and minority rights.”⁵ To this end, India and Israel have failed to cultivate systems that satisfy the needs of the latter.

Ethnonationalist sentiments have risen at the expense of minority rights and equitable representation for a few reasons.

First, there has been a surge in discontent with globalization. The strongmen of populism exploited concerns regarding the prioritization of global interests over domestic ones and instead have championed a return to national interests at home, instead of overseas. This discontent is usually a response to a rise in inequality in the benefits reaped from globalization and liberal institutions, as governments increasingly felt beholden to the invisible hand instead of imposing their own regulations to correct market imbalances. Historian Karl Polanyi boiled down why such policies became politically untenable by defining “the contradiction between democratic rule, with its respect for popular self-determination, and market logic, which holds that the economy should be left to operate with limited government interference.”⁶ As a result, the 1940s trend of domestic welfare states being propped up by international institutions has continuously eroded, coupled with a mounting distrust in the “unelected technocrats”⁷ sitting at the head of international institutions.

Second, diversity and immigration have been painted as incongruous with domestic interests of the proponents of populism. As Jack Snyder of Foreign Affairs puts it, “nativistic prejudice is latent, ready to be activated in times of cultural flux or economic strain when

⁵ Hardgrave, Robert L. “The Challenge of Ethnic Conflict; INDIA: THE DILEMMAS OF DIVERSITY.” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 4, No. 4, 1993, www.laits.utexas.edu/solvyns-project/Hardgrave.html.

⁶ Snyder, Jack. “How Nationalism Became Popular Again .” *Www*, 2019, www-foreignaffairs-com.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/articles/world/2019-02-12/broken-bargain.

⁷ Snyder, 2019.

traditional elites seem unresponsive.”⁸ Because social malaise tends to expand in environments characterized by government failures including deteriorating infrastructure, rising poverty, and economic depression, discontent foments feelings of protectionism and prioritization of personal primacies instead of widespread global altruism or interventionism.⁹

Narendra Modi and the Case of India

India presents an important example of a nation that, after emerging from a populist revolution, is being subjected to vehement ethnonationalism.

The formation of India occurred in the wake of a desire for independence from British colonial rule. On the eve of independence in 1947, the President of the Constituent Assembly, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, proclaimed: “to all the minorities in India we give the assurance that they will receive fair and just treatment and there will be no discrimination in any form against them. Their religion, their culture and their language are safe, and they will enjoy all the rights and privileges of citizenship and will be expected in turn to render loyalty to the country in which they live and to its constitution.”¹⁰

However, the ideology that birthed the Indian state has since been hijacked and morphed into the self-serving project of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), raising doubt on the function and efficacy of the Indian democratic state. Originally created as an amalgamation of states that represented unique ethnic diversity, the Indian state used to make a concerted effort to avoid the bifurcation of nationalities within the country. However, that motivation has since shifted in a

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Barber, Nigel. “The Resurgence of Nationalism.” *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-human-beast/201804/the-resurgence-nationalism.

¹⁰ Rao, B. Shiva. *The Framing of India's Constitution: a Study*. Distributors: N.M. Tripathi, Bombay, 1968.

direction that injects an intentionality in the construction of an Indian identity that is inherently exclusionary and unsecular.¹¹

Despite the strength of old Indian nationalism being deeply rooted in anticolonial sentiment, it has contemporaneously taken a shape similar to that of European nations adopting populism—a response to a dissatisfaction with the status quo and an attempt to return to the prioritization of a newly constructed national identity and internal affairs, albeit along strict racial and ethnic lines.

Thus, Indian politics inextricably remain the offspring of Indian nationalism. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS National Volunteer Organization, is the ideological mother of the BJP of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and was borne out of a disdain for the methods of Mahatma Gandhi and as a counter to Muslim separatists. The founder of the RSS, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, was “particularly critical of Gandhi's emphasis on nonviolence and civil disobedience, which [Hedgewar] felt discouraged the forceful political action necessary to gain independence.”¹² Despite being banned from joining the Congress (the historically all-India party) in 1948 after former member Nathuram Godse assassinated Gandhi, the RSS continued to energize recruitment efforts via the Jana Sangh, or People’s Union, which eventually transformed into the BJP, and also adopts the lexicon of populist movements. As Heitzman and Worden continue, “the experience of the Jana Sangh during the 1970s, especially its increasing resort to populism and agitational tactics, provided essential ingredients for the success of the

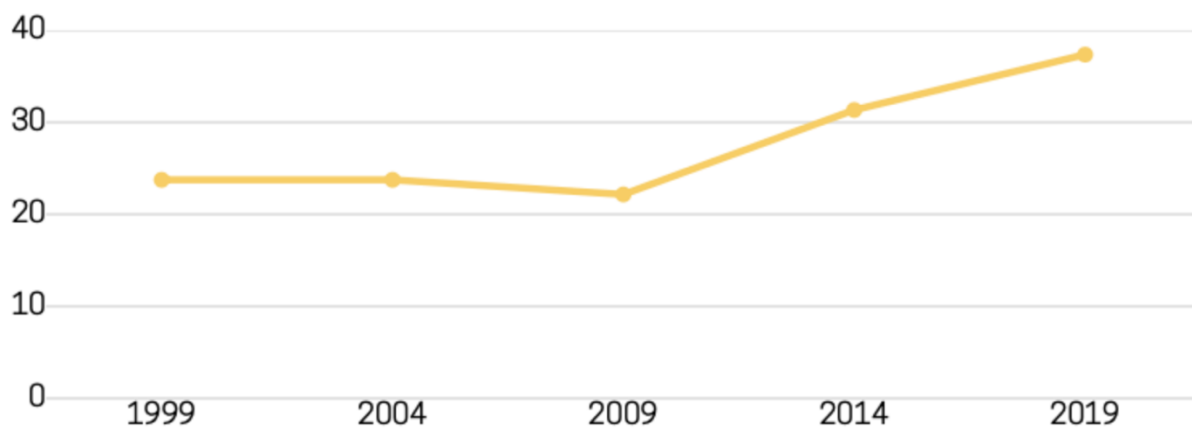
¹¹ Luthra, Sidharth. “THE NATIONALISM DEBATE, CONCERNS, AND CONSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE.” *National Law School of India Review*, Vol. 30, no. No. 1. p. 1-10.

¹² Heitzman, James, Robert L Worden, and Library Of Congress. Federal Research Division. India: A Country Study. [Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress: For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O, 1996] Pdf. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/96019266/>.

BJP in the 1980s,” a success that has all but coincidentally coincided with the rise of Muslim fundamentalism and subsequent Hindu consciousness.

Under Modi, the BJP has been able to secure several periods of electoral stability. With relative ease, the BJP fortified sweeping numbers of seats in general polls, largely in northern Indian states. The success of the BJP has also been met with an increase in income for the party and widespread funding from across the nation. “The BJP’s income of INR 970.43 crore was 51.92 percent of the combined incomes of the six national parties. A substantially higher income, and bigger expenditure on publicity and electoral propaganda than its rivals, has helped the BJP in its outreach programs.”¹³

% of votes won by the BJP in India’s last 5 national elections



The transition of the BJP into a mass-based party is reflective of its tendency to pander toward populist methodology. The BJP intentionally heavily focused on garnering support from the rural areas across India, focusing on lower castes and neglected Hindu social groups. “The

¹³ Misra, Satish. “Understanding the Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party.” *ORF*, 2018, www.orfonline.org/research/44401-understanding-the-rise-of-the-bharatiya-janata-party/.

BJP also reaped dividends from the sustained work of RSS-backed organizations in remote tribal areas over several decades.”¹⁴

The development of the BJP has led the party in a direction that is relatively typical for nations experiencing a populist revolution. The party is now characterized by a growing disdain for criticism and rising stratification and centralization of power and those able to wield it. Decision making has become increasingly exclusive and accessible only to a minority of senior party leaders. The centralized decision making is arguably reminiscent of authoritarian regimes and stands in opposition to the traditional methods of democratic accountability. Ultimately, when nationalism is divorced from necessity and missions of reform, the outcome is usually a version of undesirable extremism resulting from a fetishized conception of the nation.

This extremism has taken a form that calls into question the perpetuation of the democratic integrity of India and its purportedly secular governance. Movements of cow protection across India and the suppression of minority citizenship rights across the state point towards a departure from traditional anticolonial movements that prioritized national unity, and instead illuminate a transition towards the promotion of a Hindutva ideology that seeks to homogenize the ethnic identity of the state and transcend the traditional heterogeneity that once characterized the nation and was welcomingly embraced.

Representing 14% of the population, Muslims are the largest minority group in India, and as such, have mounted the most overt campaign against the ideologies of the RSS and the BJP. Violent conflicts have been erupting between Hindus and Muslims since colonial rule, yet no political group has managed to gain as much support as the BJP, which has bureaucratically capitalized upon and sanctioned such conflict. Modi’s government has recently implemented a

¹⁴ Satish, 2018.

number of measures aimed at the disenfranchisement and gradual exclusion of Muslim minorities. Chief among these is the recent citizenship test which has left almost 2 million Muslims stateless and led to the revocation of Kashmir's autonomy.

Additionally, in the name of protecting cows, which are sacred animals in Hinduism, several pogroms have been launched in predominantly Muslim areas which consume meat.

According to Human Rights Watch:

“Between May 2015 and December 2018, at least 44 people – including 36 Muslims – were killed in such attacks. Police often stalled prosecutions of the attackers, while several BJP politicians publicly justified the attacks...Police face political pressure to sympathize with cow protectors and do a weak investigation and let them go free,” said a retired senior police officer in Rajasthan. “These vigilantes get political shelter and help.” “In several cases, political leaders of Hindu nationalist groups, including elected BJP officials, defended the assaults.” “The authorities have even used the National Security Act – a repressive law that permits detention without charge for up to a year – against those suspected of illegally slaughtering cows.”¹⁵

The implementation of force that is absent of political negotiation invariably leads to the aggravation of the group upon which the force is applied, and ideologically represents an unjust subjugation of minority rights. This can be seen in the way that the BJP has endorsed violence, shunned secularism, and replaced it with a conscientious conflation of Hindu and Indian identity.

¹⁵ “Violent Cow Protection in India: Vigilante Groups Attack Minorities.” *Human Rights Watch*, 11 Mar. 2019, www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/18/violent-cow-protection-india/vigilante-groups-attack-minorities.

Netanyahu and the Zionist Mission in Israel

Israel serves as another case study that evidences the implications of a rise in ethnonationalist zeal and the subsequent impacts of such movements on the state's democratic integrity as the hallmark of Western liberal democracy in the Middle East. The rise of Benjamin Netanyahu as leader of the right-wing Likud party is similar to the atmosphere that gave rise to the reign of Modi in India.

The very genesis of the Israeli state was a result of ethnic conflict. The movement of Israelis into areas formerly inhabited by Palestinians led to the eventual consolidation of the Zionist movement—which calls for a strictly Jewish nation in what is now Israel—that purports an ideology similar to Hindutva, one which calls for a homogenization of identity, and links such identity to a particular land.

As a result of Jewish migration, the demographic makeup of the area experienced a change, with a large number of Palestinians ultimately being displaced as a result of Jewish entry into the area. Following the Israeli declaration of statehood in 1948, about 720,000 Palestinians were displaced and forced to relocate to some neighboring Arab states such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Palestinians that stayed in Israel were subject to martial law until 1966. These realities in tandem created the first great Palestinian refugee crisis and ultimately bred a new sense of nationalism within Palestinians. However, Zionists were far more organized than the Palestinians and their movements had long been constructed around consolidated leadership, something the Palestinians severely lacked.

This has led to the marginalization of minorities within the state. Similar to movements that isolate and marginalize non-Hindus in India, non-Jewish minorities are uniquely excluded from a large chunk of rights afforded to their Jewish counterparts.

Additionally, the rise of Benjamin Netanyahu bears a striking resemblance to the rise of Modi in India. Both leaders have led their respective nations in historically far-right directions and have done so with staunch voter bases that dictate a nationalistic trajectory for both nations. Similar to discontent with Ghandi's methods in India, Israeli supporters of Netanyahu held a strong disdain for the peace processes in which the nation engaged in an attempt to reconcile issues with Palestine. As Aaron David Miller of NPR explains, "That Netanyahu remains relevant even now with all his travails reflects the turn to the right among a majority of Israelis and the perception that he remains both an effective prime minister and spokesman for their views."¹⁶ And as Netanyahu himself puts the mission of the Likud, far-right party, "The purpose of the Jewish state is to secure the Jewish future. That is why Israel must always have the ability to defend itself, against any threat."¹⁷

As a binational and ethnic state, Israel has struggled with the allocation of civil and political rights to ethnic minorities within the state, namely Arabs and Palestinians in Israel and Palestinians in occupied territories. The Knesset—Israeli parliament—passed a new law that mandates fines for state-funded groups that question the country's status as a Jewish and democratic state. Critics say the so-called Nakba law — aimed at outlawing marking Yom Ha'atzmaut as the Arab Day of Catastrophe, or "Nakba" — limits the right to freedom of expression and is an attack on the country's Arab minority's right to remember their history in the nation. That and other recent Knesset measures — from a bill attempting to cancel Arabic's

¹⁶ Miller, Aaron David. "Opinion: Netanyahu's Staying Power Reflects Israel's Rightward Shift." *NPR*, NPR, 17 Dec. 2019, www.npr.org/2019/12/17/788812368/opinion-a-weakened-netanyahu-still-stares-down-rivals-ahead-of-a-3rd-vote-in-a-y.

¹⁷ Netanyahu, Benjamin. "Netanyahu's Speech at AIPAC (Full Text)." *The Times of Israel*, 6 Mar. 2012, www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahus-speech-at-aipac-full-text/.

status as an official language in Israel, to proposals for a mandatory loyalty oath — have sharpened feelings of disenfranchisement among many Arab citizens of Israel.¹⁸

In recent years, such disenfranchisement of Arab minorities in Israel has consistently risen. At a core level of the civic and legal representation of Arab minorities, their voice is relatively very quiet, which brings attention to the discrimination against Arabs in the processes of government and participation in the democratic system. First, Arabs have systematically been excluded from the important Knesset committees, such as Finance and Foreign Affairs, and Defense.¹⁹ Second, members of Likud recently opposed the inclusion and compensated transportation of voters from Bedouin villages, where about 50,000 Bedouin voters live in unrecognized villages, which have no public transportation, no paved roads and no polling stations.²⁰ Third, the Likud party doubled its budget for a surveillance operation targeting balloting stations in Arab towns on election day this year.²¹ All of these conditions together have created an environment in which Arab minorities are significantly barred from contributing to the election of officials to represent their interests in the government and as a result, when officials cannot represent these concerns as a result of not having their votes backing them, they cannot change the conditions for the Arab population, creating a vicious cycle of oppression. A lack of a *formal* Israeli constitution that stands over other laws has repeatedly led to the failure of the Arab population to construct a legal defense against their representative discrimination.

¹⁸ Kraft, Dina. “For Israel's Arabs, Sense of Disenfranchisement as Israel Marks 63rd Birthday.” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 26 Sept. 2017, www.jta.org/2011/05/09/israel/for-israels-arabs-sense-of-disenfranchisement-as-israel-marks-63rd-birthday.

¹⁹ Wermenbol, Grace. “The Ongoing Divide: Palestinian Participation in Israeli Elections.” *Middle East Institute*, 2019, www.mei.edu/publications/ongoing-divide-palestinian-participation-israeli-elections.

²⁰ Lis, Jonathan, and Yasmine Bakria. “Israel's AG Opposes Effort to Block Transport of Bedouin Voters to Polling Stations.” *Haaretz.com*, 11 Sept. 2019, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-israel-s-ag-opposes-effort-to-block-transport-of-bedouin-voters-to-polling-stations-1.7834527.

²¹ Magid, Jacob. “Likud Doubles Budget for Program Placing Hidden Cameras in Arab Polling Stations.” *The Times of Israel*, 30 July 2019, www.timesofisrael.com/likud-doubles-budget-for-program-placing-hidden-cameras-in-arab-polling-stations/.

Additionally, there has been popular support for preferential treatment of Jews over Arabs in Israel, leading to a culture that has become complacent in regard to the disenfranchisement of Arab minorities.²²

Disparities in the land allocated to Jews and Arabs in Israel date back to 1966, when several Arab areas were formally placed under military administration. Parallel to this action was the perpetuation of Jewish incursions on Arab lands that were being confiscated without proper compensation.²³ Additionally, the historical upper hand that Jews allowed for themselves as a result of obtaining more land has led to a wealth gap between Arab and Jewish citizens in Israel. One estimate shows that, “removing Arab populations from the [domestic inequality] equation reduces inequality by 2.3 percent.”²⁴ Furthermore, the same study finds that the Gini index measure for inequality in Israel rose 3.3 percent since 1997, whereas the average rise in the index for other OECD nations rose only by about 0.4 percent. This is effectively a result of discriminatory labor and economic policies that have been imposed in recent years as well as a response to heightening tensions among Jews and Arabs in the nation. The monthly wage of Arab workers is only 54 percent of the wage of Jewish workers. Some specific factors and policies that have contributed to these inequalities are the limited opportunities for Arabs to compete on equal terms with Jews in the labor market and a lack of real assets. Additionally, there is a minimal difference in the wealth accumulated by Jews who immigrated to Israel from Western nations and Israeli-born Jews, suggesting that the immigration and influence of foreign

²²Smootha, Sammy. “Minority Status in an Ethnic Democracy: The Status of the Arab Minority in Israel.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1990, pp. 389–413., doi:10.1080/01419870.1990.9993679.

²³Ghanem, As'ad. “State and Minority in Israel: The Case of Ethnic State and the Predicament of Its Minority.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1998, pp. 428–448., doi:10.1080/014198798329892.

²⁴Cornfeld, Ofer, and Oren Danieli. “Income Inequality in Israel: Trends and Policy.” *Israel Economic Review*, 2015.

workers does not affect economic status as heavily as ethnic background.²⁵ There have also been reports of empirical differences in the application of welfare for Jews versus Arabs.

Furthermore, the passage of a recent “nation-state law” led to heavy backlash. The law basically proposed 3 things: 1) “the right to exercise national self-determination” in Israel as “unique to the Jewish people,” 2) Hebrew as the official language of Israel with Arabic being demoted to “special status,” 3) the establishments of Jewish settlement as a “national value” and mandating that the state “will labor to encourage and promote its establishment and development.” The law has serious implications on the future paradigm under which Israel’s Arab citizens must now reside as second-class citizens and has been heavily criticized as encouraging a borderline “apartheid” within Israel.²⁶

Conclusion

The implications of India and Israel’s relationships to their ethnic minorities on democracy have become increasingly apparent and relevant in today’s volatile atmosphere of increasingly incompatible ideologies. As a result, democracy needs to be reevaluated in these nations and the threats to such democracy must be recognized in order to protect the integrity of such systems of governance in the future.

If democracy is in fact to be considered the equitable representation of both majority and minority rights, then the cases of India and Israel have quite clearly failed to remain democratic in the midst of their ethnonationalist upheavals. As a result, mediating these conflicts is paramount in order to aid the rights of minorities and subjugated groups in presumably

²⁵ Semyonov, M., and N. Lewin-Epstein. “Wealth Inequality: Ethnic Disparities in Israeli Society.” *Social Forces*, vol. 89, no. 3, 2011, pp. 935–959., doi:10.1353/sof.2011.0006.

²⁶ Berger, “Israel’s Hugely Controversial ‘Nation-State’ Law, Explained.” LOC. CIT. Page 3.

democratic nations, and to illuminate the shifting priorities of such nations in the future, in order to keep democracies working for all peoples residing in them.

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